A Closer Look at Transition Issues for the 1990s: A Response to Rusch and Menchetti

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A Closer Look at Transition Issues for the 1990s: A Response to Rusch and Menchetti

Rusch and Menchetti present the theme of their reply to our article, "Transition Issues for the 1990s," in the last two sentences of their second paragraph: "Specifically, we believe that ignoring an excellent body of literature because subjects were labeled 'severely handicapped' is unwarranted. Moreover, refocusing the goals of transition programs to include independent living and social outcomes clashes with what we believe are important trends in special education" (this issue, p. 364). We will reply to each statement as two discrete issues.

Rusch and Menchetti Issue #1: We believe that ignoring an excellent body of literature because subjects were labeled "severely handicapped" is unwarranted.

We reaffirm our position (Knowlton & Clark, 1987, p. 562) that if the transition movement in special education is to have a positive impact on the quality of adult living for all exceptional persons, then "the literature needs to broaden its focus and parameters so that a wider audience may identify with its findings and benefit from its implications." We do not ignore, nor do we recommend that others ignore any body of literature, excellent or otherwise, for any reason.

A case in point is the definition of transition portrayed in much of the special education literature. The term transition does not have only one "true" professionally accepted definition, nor is it limited in professional scope to any one exceptionality or specific severity level. However, if one were to ignore all but the majority of special education literature addressing transition, one might not get this impression.

Our intent, and actual assertion, was to point out that the current transition literature was focused too narrowly to appeal to diverse audiences that have histories of categorical specialization documented by their research and literature. Our statement was not an indictment of any of the contributors to the existing literature. Nor was it stated in a way that was intended to imply the "overrepresentation" of any contributing group, since that would suggest a criticism of the current literature on the basis of its intended audience. Our statement was an observation about the nature of the transition literature and a recommendation for how the literature could be more applicable. If any indictments are due, they more appropriately should be directed at audiences that have failed to stake their claims in the transition movement by contributing actively and aggressively in the theoretical and research literature of general special education and in the literature of their respective disciplines.

We view with respect the contributions of those specializing in advocacy and programming for persons with severe handicapping conditions. The conceptual and technological break-throughs in this area are historic. Those of us, however, who do not specialize in services for individuals with severe handicapping conditions must adopt or adapt these concepts and technologies on the basis of their relevance and usefulness for other populations with our own validation research. For example, Wehman, Hill, Wood, and Parent (1987) saw the need to conduct an even more specific subgroup analysis of persons labeled "severely mentally retarded," within the broader population label of severely handicapped in order to "see how these results might have implications for similar vocational interventions with other populations such as those labeled deaf-blind, autistic, and multiply handicapped" (p.12). Would Rusch and Menchetti deem this

procedure as merely "changing the subject descriptors . . . (to) make the transitional literature more palatable?" (p. 364)

In short, we do not understand how a call for a broader focus in the research and literature on transition is out of place. It is a logical consequence of the need for ownership and participation by those who advocate for persons of varying exceptionalities and severity levels. The responsibility rests with each discipline to advance knowledge and information and to build on what is available.

Rusch and Menchetti Issue #2: Refocusing the goals of transition programs to include independent living and social outcomes clashes with what we believe are important trends in special education.

Our article contained no explicit recommendation related to refocusing the goals of transition programs to include independent living and social outcomes; however, we are pleased to be able to respond to it as a recommendation we would have made had space permitted.

We affirm the position of Halpern (1985) on the conceptual foundations of transition. We also concur with similar views offered by Lou Brown, Paul Wehman and Susan Hasazi in "From School to Adult Living: A Forum on Issues and Trends" (Brown, Halpern, Hasazi, & Wehman, 1987). Wehman, Moon, and McCarthy (1986) also have supported a broader conceptualization of transition. Moreover, Ferguson and Ferguson (1986) presented an extremely astute analysis of this issue for persons with very severe handicaps. These views, of course, are paralleled by a similar issue of the past regarding the narrow versus broad focus of career education for exceptional children and youth, as explicated by Brolin (1974), Brolin and Kokaska, (1979), Clark (1974, 1979, 1980), Hoyt (1979), and Kokaska and Brolin (1985). The Council for Exceptional Children, the Division on Career Development, and many others also support this broader view with respect to past career education issues, as well as to the current transition movement (Council for Exceptional Children, 1978; Kokaska, Gruenhagen, Razeghi, & Fair, 1985).

Will (1984) defined the transition initiative of the U.S. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) primarily in terms of employment outcomes, but she also cited transition outcomes that reflect "choices about career options, living arrangements, social life, and economic goals that often have lifelong consequences" (p. 1). As was the case with the federal definition of career education (Hoyt, 1975), there are political subtleties to the choice of words in policy initiatives that must satisfy various factions. We do not accept the notion that one person, one federal agency, one federal initiative, or one categorical group should define transition for the field. Neither are we persuaded by statements like that of Rusch and Menchetti suggesting that domestic living and social skills should be taught only within the "naturally occurring and complex contingencies of employment settings" (p. 365). This implies that social skill development should be for the sole purpose of employment since there is an apparent exclusive "link between vocational competence and societal acceptance" (p. 365).

Although we agree that society looks more favorably on those with, rather than without jobs, we cannot regard the home and the communuty as trivial settings for instruction designed to yield

outcomes that are inconsequential to one's quality of life. Should one teach personal or domestic cooking only in a food service employment setting? Should one teach menstrual hygiene only in the restroom of a factory? Should one teach how to make friends only in the employment setting? If we view our outcome standards to encompass the community and home as well as the employment setting, these questions, as well as their answers, become more sensible. Cooking is a skill that should be taught within a food service employment setting for vocational cooking and in the home for domestic cooking. Hygiene should be taught in the factory restroom and in a variety of other community and home restroom settings. Making friends, likewise, should not be limited to work outcomes and settings; obviously, we all need as many trials in as many settings as possible to master this skill.

Differences in philosophy and belief systems make for a healthy discipline and a vital field. The particular nature of the issues special educators face requires all views to be aired and scrutinized. These issues are diverse, each reflective of multiple viewpoints and interests. Some of this diversity in viewpoints and interests no doubt stems from differences in the needs among the children and youth whom we call "exceptional." And, no doubt, we have created an unwieldy categorical system with which we try to summarize exceptional and handicapping conditions. We agree that ideally we should do away with this system. Just as a town's average yearly temperature may not accurately describe the temperature on any one day, a categorical label for a population may not accurately describe a handicapping condition as experienced by any one individual so labeled. Yet, labels do serve as signposts around which advocates, professionals, and policymakers can gather, organize their efforts, develop policies, and deliever services. Rather than removing our categorical hats in the face of the way our system works, why not simply tip them in achnowledgment, scrutiny, and support of one another's efforts on behalf of all children and youth with exceptionalities? Their needs differ; it makes sense to us then that policies and approaches to serving them should differ as well.

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